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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W PDAVIS, AF/EPS CTRIMBLE, EB/ESC
SSAARNIO, INR/AA BGRAVES

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [LI](#)

SUBJECT: LIBERIA - SUPREME COURT RULING ENDS FIRESTONE
STRIKE BUT CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS REMAIN UNCERTAIN

REF: A. MONROVIA 1418

[1](#)B. MONROVIA 887

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: Firestone employees ended their occasionally violent two-week strike and returned to work December 22 following a Supreme Court ruling that settled an internal union leadership dispute. The Court upheld the July 7 election of new leadership for the Firestone Allied Agricultural Workers Union of Liberia (FAAWUL) but did not rule on the legality of the work stoppage itself. Firestone management says it will comply with the court decision and engage the new union representatives in negotiations. While the verdict settled the strike and put an end to sporadic violence that had flared since December 6 (ref A), the impact on the prolonged Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) negotiations between Firestone and its workers is less sanguine. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) The Supreme Court decision December 21 reversed an earlier Labor Court decision that had declared the July 7 FAAWUL election results invalid (ref B). By overturning the Labor Court decision, the Supreme Court validated a process set in motion by Minister of Labor Kofi Woods in early 2007 when he suspended Firestone's collective bargaining agreement with the previous FAAWUL leadership, installed interim leaders in the spring, and later insisted on a new union election in July, despite a court order not to proceed. The election was immediately contested by the General Agricultural and Allied Workers Union of Liberia (GAAWUL, the national umbrella union), which successfully petitioned for the Labor Court ruling that annulled the election. Since July, despite demands from Woods and the election winners to recognize the new FAAWUL leadership - demands that eventually led to the walkout - Firestone management refused to take sides in the internal row pending an official judicial decision on the legality of the election.

[1](#)3. (U) According to press reports, Minister Woods sent a letter to Firestone management immediately following the Supreme Court's December 21 ruling calling for recognition of the elected leadership, the immediate lifting of the freeze on FAAWUL's account, and the lifting of the suspension on the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). A Labor Ministry statement called the ruling a major victory for justice and democracy and the protection of workers' rights.

[1](#)4. (SBU) A Firestone representative told Econoff December 26 that most workers returned to work the day after the Supreme Court ruling. She added that Firestone was awaiting the actual wording of the decision, but ultimately expected to

comply with the decision and begin talks with the new FAAWUL leaders. Firestone management has indicated previously that the new leadership could damage progress made in 2006 as part of a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) for Firestone workers, particularly if FAAWUL issues new demands that contradict deals agreed to by previous FAAWUL leaders. Firestone does not rule out the possibility that an early breakdown in talks could lead to a resumption of the strike.

15. (U) The Court Ruling did not address the issue of whether or not the work stoppage caused by the internal union rift constituted a lawful walkout or was, as Firestone claimed, an illegal strike. However, the President spoke directly to the issue in her Christmas message December 20, saying FAAWUL leaders would be held accountable for their actions. Commenting on the FAAWUL leadership dispute, the President described as "incomprehensible" the willingness of opposing union factions to call a strike, resort to lawlessness, and obstruct the rights of others while awaiting a formal judicial decision.
Booth